Two WWII Tank Destroyers Saved from the Balkan Wars Are Returning to U.S. Museums

The M36 tank destroyers were among the most effective weapons against superior German armor in World War II, with a 90mm tank gun that could defeat the heaviest German tank. Until the first M26 tanks, with their 90mm guns, arrived in Europe in the final weeks of the war, the M36 was top gun in the Allied order of battle, the sniper called up when front line troops faced a stubborn Tiger or Panther

Most of the M36s were transferred to Allied armies after the end of the war, including some to Yugoslavia in the early 1950s. The United States Army built the M36s to implement a tank destroyer doctrine that had turned out to be a mistake. While they looked like tanks, and were built on the Sherman M4 chassis, tank destroyers were only lightly armored. Crews fought from open-topped turrets and were vulnerable to artillery air bursts. Facing the worst winter in 20 years during the 1944-45 campaign, makeshift roofs were added to the M36s, but they were never comfortable battle vehicles.

When the civil wars began in Yugoslavia, alert TV watchers would catch an occasional glimpse of one of these vehicles on the evening news, moving like ghosts through Balkan towns. These 50-year-old fighting vehicles were now rare, indeed, but the Yugoslavians seem to have never discarded anything in their inventory, and here they were, rumbling into yet another war.

The sight of these rare vehicles heading into combat to face much more modern Soviet-built equipment greatly upset experts who knew how unusual the M36s had become. One museum director, Ceilia Stratton of the 4th Infantry Division Museum at Fort Hood, Texas, said she almost cried. "I knew they were doomed," she said. Fort Hood was the base for the WWII Tank Destroyer Command, and getting an M36 for the museum's holdings was something she had only dreamed about.

Also watching the news and glimpsing this rare WWII armor was Terry Dougherty, an acquisition specialist with the Army's Center for Military History, and



A WWII M36 tank destroyer is loaded on a transport at the Croatian port of Rijeka. One of the rare vehicles was being shipped to the 4th Infantry Division Museum at Fort Hood, Texas, and another to the Patton Museum of Cavalry and Armor at Fort Knox, Ky.

Photo: Robert Tilson

Charles Lemons, a curator at the Patton Museum of Cavalry and Armor at Fort Knox. Both Lemons and Dougherty feared that the M36s would not survive Serb gunfire or NATO bombs.

At the Patton Museum, curator Charles Lemons said their M36 had been hit by a large caliber HEAT round that passed through the upper section of the transmission housing, sliced through the cabling on the radio, and impacted on the hull side wall.

The picture brightened somewhat when soldiers of the 1st Armored Division entered Bosnia in late 1995 and found that many of these museum pieces had survived intact, some in very good condition. Army historians then moved in, beginning two years of negotiations with the Croats, who were the most recent owners of the tank destroyers. The vehicles were eventually purchased for about \$14,000 each.

With the negotiations successful, the Military Traffic Management Command took charge of bringing the tank destroyers home to the U.S. One was to be returned to Fort Hood's museum, the other to the Patton Museum of Cavalry and Armor at Fort Knox, Ky.

At the Patton Museum, curator Charles Lemons said their M36 had been hit by a large caliber HEAT round that passed through the upper section of the final drive housing, sliced through the cabling on the radio, and impacted on the hull side wall. The entry hole had been welded over with a patch.

The tank destroyer's original gasoline engine had been removed and replaced with a Soviet T-55 power plant because of the lack of spare parts. "It's a great conversion. I was really impressed," Lemons said. "Originally, those vehicles had a top speed of maybe 25 miles an hour. With that engine, I imagine she'll really get up and go."

This article was based on information provided by John Randt, a public affairs officer in the Military Traffic Management Command. – Ed.